

# Lafcadio Hearn:

## An Important Link between Greece and Japan

CONSTANTINOS VASSIS

There are several kinds of links between countries, namely political, economic, historical, ideological, linguistic, religious and other. However, more important and steady are the cultural links. These are not promoted by government agencies, international organizations, cultural agreements between states etc, which often serve alien aims. They are nurtured by unselfish, sometimes odd, intellectuals – writers, artists, scholars among other – who fall in love with a foreign country, and devote themselves to it for life. At the end they die, later their work may be marginalized, yet it outlives them, undamaged by time. That kind of link between Greece and Japan is Lafcadio Hearn.

Born in 1850, in Greece (Lefkas), by a simple Greek mother and a military doctor Irish father, educated in English, following a restless period of living and writing in Ireland and the USA, Hearn spent the last 14 years of his rather brief life – he died at 54, in 1904 – in Japan, a country then almost to explore. However, he discovered there his real self, the lover of the rare but beautiful, the different but interesting, the new but centuries-old, qualities of the country existing even today. He made there a family with a Japanese girl, took a Japanese name (Yakumo Koizumi), and regarded Japan as his adopted country. At the same time he watched, studied, and interpreted aesthetic, emotional, and identity-related phenomena, unknown to the West, and diffusing them in 12 books – almost a book yearly – destined to the American reader, but soon, through translation, to readers of other languages too. In the beginning of the 20th century, he was almost world-wide famous, later he lost appeal, today he is a staple reference to English-language literature of the late 19th century.

What does Hearn write in these 12 books? They are all made up of a number of texts of rather few pages, many previously published in American reviews of general interest, and portraying various aspects of Japan in an idealizing way. Some of them describe landscapes and situations, others narrate legends and traditions, others put forth ideas and impressions, many of them fulfilling the requirements of the essay. Their contents appear clearly from the titles and sub-titles as well as from their Table of contents. Which are they?

1. "Glimpses of unfamiliar Japan". Contents: The Japanese garden, the Japanese sea, the Japanese smile, and other. Hearn's first book is considered as his best.
2. "Out of the East: Reveries and studies in New Japan".
3. "Kokoro: Hints and echoes of inner Japanese life".
4. "Gleanings in Buddah-fields: Studies of hand and soul in the Far East".
5. "Exotics and retrospectives". Contents: essays on Buddhism, on beauty, on death.
6. "In ghostly Japan". Contents: stories of human predetermination, essays on Buddhism, on Japanese poetry.
7. "Shadowings". Contents: strange stories, Japanese studies, fantasies.
8. "A Japanese miscellany". Contents: strange stories, folklore gleanings, "studies here and there".
9. "Kotto: Being Japanese curios, with sundry cobwebs".
10. "Kwaidan: Stories and studies of strange things".
11. "Japan: An attempt at interpretation". The book is more mature and reasoning, reassesses and summarizes Hearn's experience in Japan, the author is necessarily more reserved and cautious in his appreciations.
12. "The romance of the Milky way: and other studies and stories". Published posthumously, is a minor work.

As it emerges from the contents of Hearn's books, a great part of them revolves around the afterlife, the supernatural, to wit the weird happenings, the ghosts, the unreasonable beings, all common to traditional literature

of other Asian peoples too, in particular China. The subject is attractive to the common reader, to the effect that many people believe that Hearn is basically a writer of this material: Hearn's most accessible books of this nature are "Kwaidan", "Kotto", and "In ghostly Japan".

But Hearn does not write only about Japan's culture, he does this also for his own, the European, particularly in its English aspect. He teaches English literature at the Tokyo Imperial University, drawing not from scholarly studies but from his insatiable reading. Yet his knowledge is impressive, although not profound, a reason he has not a high opinion of it, and prefers to teach off-hand. After his death, some of his students will assemble, from their notes, his lectures in texts, that will be published in 4 volumes of some 3,000 pages, making them a respectable history of English literature from the 12th to the 19th century. Hearn comes out of it as a responsible critic, occasionally, and unavoidably, biased, but bold, and based on facts, in his judgement.

Some Western critics have thought Hearn as Japan's national writer, but they were wrong. The Japanese came to know Hearn with delay, after he was translated in their language, which he had scantily learned. However, Japan has published all his work in both languages, and has used excerpts from his books in schoolbooks to learn English. Most Japanese know Hearn from these books.

In Greece, Hearn had an unusual publishing career. Soon "exotic" and "fantastic" parts of his books, translated from French translations of them, were published in reviews of general interest, while the press spoke of the Greek national writer of Japan. Later, from the middle of 20th century, studies on Hearn were published, and, starting the 21st century, books accessible to the median reader were published, translated from English and French translation; but none of the thoughtful and demanding books of Hearn came out in Greek.

But Greece has honoured Hearn with an international symposium on him, held in Athens, in October 1998; fifteen specialists (Greek, English, American and Irish) presented original studies on him. On the other hand, Hearn is at times honoured, with summer events, in his island of birth

(Lefkas), in whose central park stand since 1933 a memorial column on him, and since 1987 a marble bust of him.

Of particular interest is what Hearn writes about Greece.

Together with his parents, Hearn left Greece, 2 years old, for Ireland, and stayed there for 2 more years with his mother, before she fled a matchless and hence unhappy marriage, and went back to Greece to start a new, but again not rosy, life. Hearn was left under the care of his Irish aunt, and grew with her until adulthood, subsequently emigrating to the USA, and embarking on a writer's career there. But he hardly knew his father, who, after obtaining a divorce, married an Irish girl, and lived mostly abroad, owing to his profession. Hearn will never visit Greece, and will not learn its language. But he will always retain a faint yet affectionate memory of mother, while holding a grudge against his father, whom he blames for breaking up the parents' marriage. These feelings will transpire in his writing about his two countries of origin.

In most of his writings, including the university lectures, Hearn has in mind mostly Greece, little Ireland. Consequently, his references to the latter are minimal, except when treating major Irish figures of English literature (Berkeley, Moore and Swift) in his lectures. Hearn's main concern is to extol Japanese culture especially in respect to Ancient Greek culture, held as a standard of European, if not world, culture. In consequence, references to Ancient Greece are often found in his lectures and his books, barring the very Japanese ones ("*Kotto*", "*Kwaidan*" and "*In ghostly Japan*"). Hearn displays in them an astonishing, although not erudite, knowledge about Ancient Greek art, aesthetics, history, literature, mythology and religion, all gathered from his voracious reading.

In conclusion, Hearn is a rare case of intellectual, without a distinct national identity but with a work reaching all around the world. Japan has considered him as the best interpreter of its culture abroad, although he approached it as an amateur. There have been many foreigners, mostly English and Americans, who devoted their life and activity to Japan, producing important scholarly works about its history, folklore, literature, language etc. Japan had acknowledged and awarded all, but has reserved

a special affection for Hearn, reciprocating his own for Japan.

In this sense, Lafcadio Hearn is an important link between Greece and Japan.

## Abstract

Lafcadio Hearn was born in 1850, on Lefkas island of Greece, by an Irish father and a Greek mother. After the couple quickly split, he was raised by an aunt in Ireland, but later emigrated to the USA, where he started a writing career. In 1890 he travelled to Japan as a correspondent for an American magazine. Charmed by the country, he stayed there for fourteen years until his death, having made a family with a Japanese girl and adopted a Japanese name (Yakumo Koizumi). At the same time he wrote twelve books, in which he portrayed in an idealized way various aspects of Japan, such as folklore, nature, poetry, religion, mores and usages, and strange stories. The books were intended for the American reader, but they were soon translated in other languages, making the author world-famous. Hearn also taught English literature at the Tokyo Imperial University, his published lectures establishing him as an accomplished scholar and critic. Of particular interest are the numerous references to Greece found throughout his writings, which reflect the fondness he felt for his mother throughout his life. (References to Ireland, on the other hand, are extremely rare.) All these elements make Hearn an important link between Greece and Japan.